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Targeting Domestic Violence Center To Help Victims

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SALEM - It's a traumatic prospect for any domestic violence victim: having to do battle with her batterer in court. But the ordeal is even more difficult for victims who can't afford a lawyer.

Soon a new resource will be available in Essex County to expand legal help to victims who find themselves in that predicament.

Set to open Jan. 22, the Essex County Family Legal Aid Center will provide free legal assistance to low-income domestic violence victims in civil court. The center will be close to the Essex Probate and Family Court, where many matters involving domestic violence victims, from restraining order applications to child custody disputes, are heard.

Advocates for domestic violence victims say the new center, funded with a \$303,000 federal grant, will be an important step toward getting people the legal help they need.

"We're thrilled," said Ross Dolloff, executive director of Neighborhood Legal Services, a Lynn-based agency that will run the office in collaboration with Lowell-based Merrimack Valley Legal Services.

The two agencies provide free legal representation to low-income people, including domestic violence victims, in civil matters. But Dolloff said there is a "huge need" for the services, and the new center will "get us much further along in terms of our ability to serve that need."

The grant will pay the salaries of two lawyers and an intake specialist for 18 months at the center, which will operate out of rented space in Salem's old Masonic building at 70 Washington St. Center organizers hope to obtain more funds to extend the program.

In addition to expanding the amount of legal help available, the

center, because of its location near the Probate Court, will allow for that help to be more readily accessible. Merrimack Valley Legal Services, which has an office in Lawrence, is convenient for people with cases in the Essex County Probate Court division in that city. And both Merrimack and Neighborhood are near district courts. But neither has an office in Salem.

"Salem . . . is really developing into the chief probate court for the county, so it's very, very critical that we have a presence there," said Kenneth MacIver, director of Merrimack Valley Legal Services. "It's just going to serve our clients a whole lot better."

Dolloff said that because the center will be just up the street from the court, it will be easy for Probate Court staff to refer people to it.

The center is also designed to improve coordination among the two legal service groups and agencies in the region that provide counseling and other non-legal services to victims of domestic violence.

Six of those agencies teamed up with the two legal service groups to apply for the grant: Help for Abused Women and their Children, based in Salem; the Women's Resource Center in Lawrence; the Newburyport Crisis Center; Action Inc., in Gloucester; Alternative House, based in Lowell; and North Shore Community Action Program, based in Peabody. The money was awarded through the US Justice Department's Violence Against Women office.

"It really brings together for the first time all the people who do work for victims of domestic violence in a single project. So it's quite exciting," MacIver said.

Dolloff said the two attorneys staffing the center, Patricia A. Levesh and Vita Palazzolo, will work closely with the domestic violence service organizations. He said that would allow for easier referral from those agencies of victims needing legal help, but also referral by the center of clients who need counseling and other support services.

"It's going to be hugely beneficial for our clients," said Candace Waldron, executive director of Help for Abused Women and their Children.

Waldron said HAWC advocates help domestic violence victims file restraining orders in district court. But she said any complicated

issues relating to divorce, child custody, and child support are typically heard in probate court, and for those matters, "we really need legal representation for our clients. That's what this center is going to provide."

Having a lawyer can often be the difference between a woman staying in a violent relationship and being able to break out of one, Waldron said.

"Batterers use the courts as a way to maintain control," she said. "One of the ways is they make threats like, 'Don't divorce me. I can get everything, including the kids.' That's one of the main reasons women don't want to leave. Without a lawyer facing the batterer in the context of the courtroom . . . it can be intimidating. A lot of women don't even want to start the process because they feel already defeated."

Levesh and Palazzolo both bring experience in representing domestic violence victims. Each lives in Gloucester.

A graduate of New England School of Law, Levesh, 47, has been a staff attorney for legal service organizations for 16 years. For the past five years she has worked for Greater Boston Legal Services, based in Boston. Before that, she worked for Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services, based in Cambridge, and for Southeastern Massachusetts Legal Services in New Bedford.

Palazzolo, 29, is a graduate of Boston College Law School. She has worked as an attorney for the Merrimack Valley Legal Services office for the past two years.

Levesh and Palazzolo, who serve on a statewide family law task force, both say they look forward to working at the new center.

"It's an opportunity to do the kind of work I'm doing now - which is advocating for victims of domestic violence - in my own backyard," Levesh, who served for a time on HAWC's board, said. "It's really exciting to me to be able to work with these people who are so committed to this work."

Said Palazzolo, "One of the things that excites me about it is starting up a new office and making our legal services more accessible to people in the North Shore area. . . . Being in Salem will be a big plus for a lot of our clients."